

Running Head: SERVING HUMANITY

Leadership: A Service to Humanity

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ABSTRACT

The nature and function of leadership is a fascinating area of study. The nature of leadership has four primary categories to include listening, vision, relationship development, and empowerment. Efficient schools emphasize these categories and develop great organizational cultures. In addition to the four categories described in the nature of leadership, there are two factors relevant to the importance of leadership. These factors include equal opportunity along with distributed leadership and social justice. This article examines both the nature and importance of leadership.

Leadership: A Service to Humanity

Leadership, although difficult to precisely define, is a ubiquitous phenomenon that touches every aspect of the human experience. However, as one studies leadership, several characteristics consistently emerge as relevant issues worthy of detailed reflection and analysis. These characteristics include empathic listening, committed action, service, and empowerment. Beyond the themes, traits, characteristics, and definitions of leadership, the importance and recognition of effective leadership become even more salient in an age of diversity and accountability.

The Nature of Leadership

Listening in Leadership

Leadership requires the leader to exhibit exceptional listening skills. Wolvin and Coakley (1992) argue that listening is the single greatest skill of a leader; however, few leaders have ever experienced specific training in listening. Furthermore, a leader needs empathic listening skills. The ability to truly understand another and offer emotional support and compassion is fundamental to the leadership process. Gill (2006) contends that openness within an organization increases when people believe that their thoughts and feelings are appreciated and understood. This openness creates the potential for an interdependent relationship between leaders and followers. The interdependent nature of leadership is rapidly replacing the outdated “top-down” approach of previous decades (Johnson, 1996). Additionally, Covey (1989) believes that leaders should seek to understand those whom they lead. Creating an understanding relationship based on empathy helps an organization develop and achieve maximum effectiveness. It is only possible to become a great, empathic leader when an individual turns himself/herself over

to the service and understanding of the people whom they serve. Moreover, DePree (1989) believes that great leaders abandon themselves to the strengths of others. This abandonment of selfish desires allows leaders to maximize the abilities of their followers; therefore, quality and organizational effectiveness are substantially increased.

Vision in Leadership

The second critical facet of leadership is commitment and vision. Vision is the ability to see the larger context of what is possible. Specifically, the educational leader is able to mobilize efforts to increase achievement and create a school atmosphere or culture of continuous improvement (Harris, 2004). In fact, Deal and Peterson (1999) advocate for a culture that reveals the true reason for the organization's existence. In order to achieve this visionary cultural atmosphere, the need for distributed leadership arises. Harris (2004) concluded that the visionary perspective requires the development of "an emerging model of leadership that is less concerned with individual capabilities, skills and talents and more preoccupied with creating collective responsibility for leadership action and activity" (p.19). It is, however, important to note that distributed leadership is not about delegating tasks to others. Rather, distributed leadership redistributes power throughout the organization. Blasé and Anderson (1995) argue that leaders who empower followers must be willing to transfer power rather than share power. This transfer of power is essential to a successful visionary effort.

Relationship Development

The third aspect of leadership is about relationships and service. Developing relationships with colleagues, constituents, and members of the community is necessary for effective leadership (Boyatzis, 2005). Moreover, Goleman (2000) found a strong

correlation between quality organizational relationships and the rewarding benefits of work. Simply put, good leaders develop strong relationships with the individuals whom they lead and in turn produce greater organizational efficiency. Furthermore, leadership has a strong service component. Sergiovanni (2000) contended that all stakeholders within an educational organization have and express servant leadership. Servant leadership is rooted in the development of the overarching ideas and beliefs that help shape the school community. The primary characteristic of servant leadership is trust. If leaders cannot establish trust within the organization, the effectiveness of that leader is greatly diminished (Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Goleman, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000). Servant leadership and inspirational leadership seem to have a reciprocal relationship. That is, as the leader serves and inspires followers, the followers serve, inspire and build upon the leader's desire and passion to serve.

Leadership as Empowerment

The fourth characteristic of leadership is empowerment. Empowerment shifts organizations from power-over scenarios to power-with scenarios (Blasé & Anderson, 1995). The attainment of power-with scenarios increases trust within schools. Power-with scenarios reduce tensions and allow all members of the larger school community to work toward a common goal. In short, this allows for an interdependent relationship to form. Once the interdependent and trusting relationship has formed, the potential for superior accomplishments increases dramatically (Meier, 2002). The heart of empowerment rests with the distributed leadership theory. Empowerment is not about control; rather, empowerment establishes confidence and distributes power throughout the organization (Harris, 2004). Therefore, others are inspired to achieve more. In short,

leaders do not achieve things on their own. Great leadership recognizes, nurtures, and needs the input of others.

The Importance of Leadership

Leadership is arguably the single most important factor in an organization's success or failure. Quality leadership is required for any organization to be successful. Schools are social organizations that require skilled and multi-leveled leadership. As the age of accountability continues, educators and educational systems, now more than ever, need great leadership.

Equal Opportunity

One fundamental aspect of educational leadership in the modern era is achievement and equal access. Gill (2006) argues that good leaders have a responsibility to help make their subordinates' dreams come true. If educational leaders are to make dreams come true, there must be a plan for addressing the achievement gap that exists within educational systems. It has long been noted that achievement of minority groups has lagged that of the majority. For example, Goldring and Greenfield (2002) note that ethnicity is closely linked to poverty and school success. Moreover, minority students are much more likely to drop out of school than their cultural counterparts (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Lyman & Villani, 2002). In a world of rapidly expanding multi-racial populations, educational leaders must recognize and address the issues that plague such populations. However, solving such problems is neither an easy nor a "one size fits all" effort. Johnson (1996) contends that attempting to solve new problems with old solutions only leads to greater public doubts and distrust. Due to this mistrust, the importance of power sharing, creative ideas, and distributed leadership re-emerges.

Distributed Leadership and Social Justice

As noted above, distributed leadership is an important factor for maximum effectiveness within schools. Additionally, distributed leadership expands upon traditional leadership thinking. Larson and Murtadha (2002) argue for a socially just leadership based in love. Love is the most effective way for predominantly poor and disenfranchised populations to gain access to education. In short, educational leaders leading in a society of great diversity, ability levels, and needs should have a genuine concern for the well-being and success of all within the larger school community.

Indeed, discussing the nature and importance of leadership is a difficult process. Leadership, unlike other fields of study, has no agreed-upon definition or model of exercise. Nevertheless, leadership is the steady glue that binds all human activity together. Leadership is the expressing of goals and visions and the willingness to pursue those goals and visions with an unwavering determination, compassionate heart, and inspiring character. Also, it is important to note that simply having a leader is not enough—it is crucial to have a leader who emphasizes his/her strengths, develops others' leadership skills, and empowers all stakeholders of the school community.

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